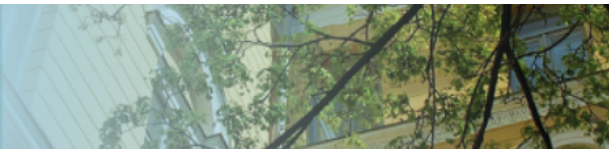


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Aviation, the Nation and Humanism:

Aerial Combat in the Works of André Malraux and Antoine de Saint-

Exupéry

The two French authors who form the subject of this paper have long been associated with aviation. André Malraux is most renowned for his political novels of the 1930s which reveal an existential understanding of revolutionary activity articulating, increasingly, a concern with humanism via the notion of fraternity. He was also an active member of the international antifascist movement and, by the mid 1930s, seen as a fellow-traveller of the communists, a reputation that rendered his post-war conversion to Gaullist conservatism all the more remarkable. This paper will consider three of Malraux's novels: *Le Temps du mépris* (*Days of Contempt*, 1935), which recounts the flight (in both senses of the word) of Kassner, a Czechoslovakian communist from Nazi Germany; *L'Espoir* (*Man's Hope*, 1937), which is concerned with the Spanish Civil War and is partly based on Malraux's own experience as a squadron commander in the Republican forces; and *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg* (*The Walnut Trees of Altenberg*, 1942), Malraux's final novel, which deals partly with the French defeat of 1940, where the hero has chosen a tank regiment over aviation, just as Malraux himself had the previous year.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, a contemporary of Malraux, was both a professional aviator and writer, publishing a series of novels and essays in the 1930s that presented aviation

within a similar metaphysical and humanist framework to Malraux's. For Saint-Exupéry, aviation was above all a means of establishing a network of fraternal relations; its use in warfare therefore ran contrary to this primarily humanist understanding of aviation's function. Both writers, then, are perceived as exponents of "heroic humanism";¹ a form of humanism predicated upon the value of action and the confrontation with death through which the value of humanity as a whole is asserted. Like Malraux, Saint-Exupéry is considered a proponent of "virile fraternity" which manifest itself predominantly in the latter's work through the camaraderie of his aviators.² However, Saint-Exupéry's work, it is usually claimed, lacks the political dimension of Malraux's and is therefore rarely considered in relation to the latter.

By examining one of Saint-Exupéry's last works, *Pilote de guerre* (*Flight to Arras*, 1942), which recounts the author's experiences as the pilot of an observation plane during the defeat of 1940, I hope to revise this view. In particular, I wish to consider the role that aviation and aerial combat play in the formulation of both authors' understanding of the nation via a re-articulation of their humanist principles. In both cases the discovery of the nation constitutes a radical reversal of political positioning; Malraux will abandon the far left in the 1940s for Gaullism. Saint-Exupéry, renowned for his apoliticism, will reveal a sense of rootedness in the French nation that transforms defeat into victory for an author often perceived as a disappointed victim of his own idealism. In both cases, this discovery is not so much facilitated by aviation, but by the return to earth that follows flight. This was possible as both authors considered aviation within a broader metaphysical framework that informed their work as a whole. It is therefore important to

consider the concept of aviation in both authors' work before then considering how the return to earth facilitates a re-conceptualization of the nation.

The constant enemy of all human activity throughout Malraux's novels of the 1930s is the natural world. The latter is often associated with the stillness and indifference of cosmic time in contrast to the Malrauxian hero's own sense of finitude. Flight, like the action of earlier Malrauxian heroes, constitutes a revolt against the natural world. In the storm that engulfs his plane in *Le Temps du mépris*, Cassner and his pilot are united fraternally in a battle with the elements: "the desire for revenge over the hurricane was between them in the cockpit."³ The fraternity of Malraux's aviators becomes a force for countering the indifferent forces of nature. Thus, in *L'Espoir*, during the Battle of Guadalajara, the fraternal struggle of the aviators with the elements constitutes a rival force to this latter:

The indifferent sea of clouds was no stronger than these planes flying in formation towards a common enemy, united in their friendship as they were by the shared risk hidden everywhere in this placid sky. It was no stronger than these men who all accepted to die for something other than themselves, united by the movement of the compass in the same fraternal fate.⁴

Flight constitutes a challenge on the part of humanity to the cosmic order of things from which it is excluded. The aircraft therefore exists as another weapon in Malraux's arsenal

with which the war against an indifferent universe can be waged and through which humanity asserts its presence in the world.

A similar understanding of aviation technology as a tool through which the airman asserts himself informs Saint-Exupéry's writing. In *Pilote de guerre*, as Saint-Exupéry abandons his training for the reality of his first military mission, he notes: "We will at last try out our weapons on real enemies. The ruler, the setsquare and the compass will be used to build a new world or to triumph over our enemies. No more playing around!"⁵

Once kitted up in the plane, the aviator becomes a part of the ensemble, a network of meaning informed by a faith in technology itself at the heart of which sits the individual pilot. Referring to his oxygen mask and suit, he writes:

All these tubes, guts and cables have become a communication network. I am an organism that extends throughout the plane. [...] All this seemed inhuman before the flight, and now, fed by the plane itself, I feel a sort of filial attachment. (40)

The plane is humanized by the presence of the pilot, becoming an agent of human will, but it also invests the pilot with the security technology apparently supplies. Saint-Exupéry understands the plane and aviation technology, as does Malraux, as an object that is ready-at-hand, in the Heideggerian sense of the term. As Jean-Paul Sartre observed, the plane becomes in Saint-Exupéry's work a tool through which humanity acts upon the world and therefore shapes history.⁶

Yet, in *Pilote de guerre*, aviation initially appears to fail as a means for understanding a broader metaphysical struggle. Indeed, it denies Saint-Exupéry any form of participation in the events taking place below as French forces battle the German invader (52).

Observation from above is not enough:

The earth is empty.

It's impossible to make out a single man at ten kilometres distance. Human activity can not be gauged on this scale. Our cameras only serve now as microscopes. [...] I have become an icy intellectual and their war is nothing more for me now than a laboratory study. (72)

The nation below is distanced as if through the "glass case of a museum" (74).

Technology is now reconsidered as a tool of war, destroying human contact, rather than creating it in the discovery of a shared cause: "War is [only] a simulacrum of adventure. Adventure depends upon the wealth of human relations it creates, the problems it poses, the creations it brings about. [...] War is not an adventure; it's an illness" (76).

Furthermore, as Saint-Exupéry's plane begins to fail around him, it becomes suggestive of the absurdity of the author's striving to find meaning in defence of the nation:

"Everything seems absurd. Nothing works. Our world is made up of cogs that don't intermesh" (84-85).

Flight also confronts Malraux's characters with the absurdity of the human condition; an absurdity rendered all the more pertinent by combat and the imminence of death. Thus

Malraux's aviators sense that the glimpse of the cosmic afforded by flight threatens to negate their human achievements. In *L'Espoir*, after the successful bombing of the Nationalist barracks in Talavera, and as the Republican bomber rises above the cloud in the night sky, the narrator reports: "No human gesture was a match [for this]; the euphoria that follows every combat was lost in geological serenity, in the harmony of the moon and the pale metal of the plane which shone as stones [scattered] on dead planets shine for millennia" (256-57). Here then we are reminded that the plane remains an object carved out of the material, natural world, which stands in opposition to the human; it therefore also retains its monstrous indifference to human endeavours in the minds of both writers.

Yet, the fraternal struggle against the natural world, through flight and all its dangers, endows Malraux's characters with a sense of human permanence often lacking in his earlier novels: in their collective struggle, and more particularly in their return to earth, Malraux's characters realize that humanity's struggle with the natural world is an age-old phenomenon, one that confers a certain permanence on human activity. Thus, in contrast to Saint-Exupéry's flight in *Pilote de guerre*, the view of the earth from above supplies Kassner with a glimpse of humanity's constant struggle with the earth and the natural world, a struggle whose permanence not only reinstates human dignity, but which also confers permanence on humanity's presence in the world, revealing "the stubborn world of men" (1935: 143-44).

It is in one of the final episodes of *L'Espoir*, however, (the celebrated descent from the mountain) that Malraux refines this discovery of human permanence in the return to earth. Here Spanish peasants come to the rescue of one of the international aircrews shot down in the mountains above Teruel. The ascent of the mountain to retrieve the dead and the wounded is largely seen through the eyes of Magnin, the squadron leader, who initially senses the eternal rooted inaccessibly in the mountain landscape. While human activity seems to suggest a succession of events, reflected in the sight of Segunte and its fortresses where Christian, Roman and Punic ramparts have all been constructed on top of one another (544), the sight of an apple tree which thrives amidst “geological indifference” (549), feeding off the ring of apples rotting at its roots, suggests both the world’s indifference to human activities and its natural permanence in contrast to humanity’s fragility.

However, Magnin’s encounter with the local peasants reveals them to possess a timelessness that results from the struggle with this inhospitable environment. The description of the wounded then suggests a parallel between their eternal suffering and that now endured by Magnin’s aviators, as the Spanish peasants’ suffering becomes a metaphor for all humanity’s struggle in an indifferent universe, a suffering that is revealed through the failure of aviation and the return to earth. The wounded thus remind Magnin of “engravings of ancient torture” (500). This recognition of the eternity of suffering is echoed in the peasants’ recognition in one wounded airman of “the image that, for centuries, the peasants had constructed of war itself” (561).

As the cortege descends the mountain, it takes on a rhythm which itself suggests an affinity between the suffering of humanity and the eternal, cyclical movement of nature: “And this rhythm tuned to their pain seemed to fill the immense gorge where the last of the birds screeched like the solemn beating of the drum during the funeral march” (559). Thus, Malraux’s aviators appear to Magnin to be momentarily incorporated into nature’s eternal rhythm not through a transcendental relationship with the natural world itself, but through the recognition of what binds them to the people: the shared suffering reflected in a people engaged in an age-old struggle with the earth and thereby bound up in its eternal rhythm. This realization of human permanence to be found in the fraternity of suffering is located primarily in the consciousness and field of vision of Magnin the aviator. In this, as Gino Raymond argues, the Malrucian hero and particularly the aviator possess a shamanic quality, briefly able to communicate through flight and the return to earth between earthly and cosmic time, between the individual and the fraternal.⁷

It is this investment of human communities, via the notion of the people, with a sense of permanence derived from the conflict with natural, cosmic forces that informs the subsequent elevation of the national community in Malraux’s writing. This conflict is bound up with the notion of the rhythm revealed in the descent from the mountain (a form of anti-flight) in *L’Espoir*. The same sense of rhythm is to be found in the depiction of the French peasantry in Malraux’s novel of the French defeat of 1940, *Les Noyers de l’Altenburg*. War, Vincent Berger observes as his tank regiment tears through the French countryside in May 1940, has destroyed “[the] old accord between man and the earth.”⁸ The world around Berger and his comrades in arms is “an indifferent menace” (267).

Berger and his men survive battle but only after a near-death experience in which their tank falls into a German tank trap.

Taking shelter in a nearby village, Berger discovers a world that has survived the trials and tribulations of war and history. The barns in which he and his comrades sleep are those “of gothic times” (288). While war has apparently destroyed the accord between the peasantry and the natural world, the evidence of peasant life reveals “the old human race that we have banished and which has left behind its tools, its washing [...], but which seems to have emerged across the millennia from the darkness” (288). A peasant woman who has refused to leave the village appears to Berger “supported by the cosmos like a stone...” (289).

Again Malraux is suggesting a rhythm that is predicated upon that of the natural world and that is born of the conflict with the latter. The French peasantry partakes in the same collective and tenacious struggle for permanence that Magnin witnesses in the Spanish peasantry. However, it is this understanding of human communities as fraternal constructs that, in Malraux’s subsequent essays and political speeches, is translated to the national community. In Malraux’s post-war thinking, therefore, the nation derives its strength and sense of permanence from the stubborn persistence of its people as a fraternal entity. Yet it is also guided by a shamanic figure in the mould of Malraux’s aviators. In France, this figure will become General de Gaulle.

Let us return to Saint-Exupéry who we left in mid-air. Flight has left Saint-Exupéry unable to gauge any coherence in the events he witnesses from above. Half-way through *Pilote de guerre*, however, Saint-Exupéry digresses; in mid-flight, he begins to recall the scenes he witnessed on the ground several days before when virtually the entire population of the North of France spontaneously evacuated before the German advance. Here he is struck by “the sudden, painful vision of a France that’s spilling its guts” (124). The memory of the Exodus initially reinforces his belief that the events of May 1940 resist all interpretation, historical or political.

However, this memory merges with a more personal memory of the French countryside and people of Saint-Exupéry’s childhood. As the Germans open fire on his plane as he reaches his target, he is finally able to make sense of the world below him again (151). The landscape below now fuses with his memory of France: “I can almost reach out and touch all the good things that lie so close to me. Those plums on that tree. This earth and its earthy smell. It must be good to walk through these damp fields” (153).

The memory of the countryside below leads to a re-appropriation of the world, an appropriation that flight had previously denied. Flight and its inadequacies lead here to a desire to return to earth and the human community. However, flight is now also sustained by the memory of human relations below as the landscape and these relations become intelligible once more: “How could I have ever been mistaken as to my welcome now that everything was becoming familiar and rustic, that the wet tiles of the houses were glistening so delightfully, and that nothing was changing nor seemed to need to change?”

(158). Subsequently Saint-Exupéry is able to reconnect with the scenes of national suffering he discerns below him:

I am part of this crowd. This crowd is part of me. At 530 kmh, now that I've emerged from the clouds, I merge with it in the evening light, like a shepherd who, with a single glance, takes in and gathers together the flock. This crowd is no longer a crowd, but a people. How could I ever feel despair? (194)

Flight is therefore reinvested with its ability to establish human relations via the memory of the earth and an imagined return. More than this, it now serves, via this fusion, to forge a vision of the nation. Like Malraux's vision of the people, this too is constructed through the notion of suffering:

I can no longer oppose the world of the plane and that of the ground. [...] We have witnessed France in flames. [...] We studied from on high a distant land, as if through the glass case of a museum. [...] Then we came back down. We hurled ourselves into the fire. We sacrificed everything. And there we learned more about ourselves than we would have learned in years of meditation. (197)

Like Malraux's concept of the national community, it also relies on a shamanic figure, the aviator, whose journeys allow a communication between below and above, between the mundane and the eternal.

In 1939, and despite his aviation experience in the Spanish Civil War, Malraux volunteered to join a tank regiment instead of the air force. Later, during the Occupation, he would lead a *maquis* Resistance unit. The term *maquis* refers to a scrubland plant that grows throughout France. In many ways, the choice of tanks and then the *maquis* over aviation reflects a movement already discernible in *L'Espoir*: the rejection of flight via the return to earth for a more intimate discovery of seemingly timeless human communities of which the nation was to become Malraux's ultimate example. The same movement in Saint-Exupéry's *Pilote de guerre*, on the other hand, is followed by a return to aviation, which is then reinvested with its full potential as a tool for establishing human relations, here within the context of the French national community. Famously, Saint-Exupéry died whilst serving again in the French air force in July 1944. The return to earth is an essential part of the process of discovering the nation in the works of both authors. In both, this discovery proceeds from an understanding of humanity and of human suffering that, in part, depends upon aviation as its tool. Despite its association in the 1930s with indiscriminate killing, aviation remains for Malraux and Saint-Exupéry a tool of metaphysical discovery.

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¹ Serge Losic, *L'Idéal humain de Saint-Exupéry* (Paris: A.G.Nizet, 1965), 27. All translations are my own.

² Ibid., 69.

³ André Malraux, *Le Temps du mépris* (Paris: Gallimard, 1935), 136.

⁴ André Malraux, *L'Espoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 533-34.

⁵ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Pilote de guerre* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1957), 6.

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Folio, 1996), 237. First published in 1948.

⁷ *André Malraux: Politics and the Temptation of Myth*, 182.

⁸ André Malraux, *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 269.